

Review

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Ansari, Aziz, with Eric Klinenberg. *Modern Romance*. Pp. 288. London: Penguin Random House, 2015. US \$17.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780143109259.

Wilby, Rosie. *Is Monogamy Dead?* Pp. 340. London: Accent Press, 2017. US \$11.85 (paper). ISBN: 9781786154538.

Nodell, Jacque. *How to Go Steady*. Pp. 200. 2017. US \$9.99 (paper). ISBN: 9781983612909.

Review by Amy Burge

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The literary fields of sociology, self-help, history, and popular culture have, for a long period, produced books about love and romance. The three titles above offer a more humorous, informal look at modern practices of love, dating, and relationships. Two are written by comedians—Ansari and Wilby—and Nodell’s book draws on historical content from American romance comics, itself an emergent heritage genre. All three books share a common theme—the search for a successful romantic relationship—which they explore from different perspectives. Ansari’s focus is on technological development and its effect on love and dating in the digital era; Wilby tackles the concept of monogamy and its function in Western society; and Nodell presents relationship advice for young women from mid-twentieth-century US romance comics. Following allegations of sexual misconduct made against Ansari in January 2018, *Modern Romance* is also now unavoidably read in light of #MeToo (more on that later).[1]

The problems and the challenges of romantic love are themes shared by all three works. Ansari states about *Modern Romance*: “I wrote this book because I wanted to better understand all the conundrums that come up in modern romance” (236). Wilby invites her readers to “hold each other’s hands and work out how to go about relationships in this scary, busy, digital twenty-first century” (8). Nodell’s approach is rooted in historical issues and advice, but her frequent indication of the relevance of advice from the 1960s and 1970s for romance today is a reminder of the overarching, longer structures of behaviour, manner, and advice that are persistent over time.[2]

Modern Love is driven by a hypothesis that technology has led to changes in the way we 'do' love in the modern world, citing the statistic that in 2014 "the average American spent 444 minutes per day—nearly 7.5 hours—in front of a screen, be it a smartphone, tablet, television, or personal computer" (29). He goes so far as to argue that "our romantic lives now inhabit two worlds: the real world and our phone world" (177). Ansari acknowledges that "in books like this it's easy to get negative about technology and its impact" (242). For example, Chapter 6 "Old Issues: New Forms: Sexting, Cheating, Snooping, and Breaking Up" focuses on technology as a "new format" in "age-old issues like jealousy, infidelity, and sexual intimacy" (177). Ansari observes that "The advantages of technology that facilitate regular dating (such as the ease of access and the absence of the pressure found in an in-person interaction) also transfer over to cheating" (188). But he's careful not to come down on either side of the argument (which he explicitly acknowledges in the epilogue). He notes that there are some positive romantic experiences that technology facilitates, for example the expansion of online dating means it becomes easier to find a partner one can get "really excited about" (236). The most overt celebration of technology comes towards the end of the book, where Ansari shares two examples (one drawn from his own romantic life) of how emails and text messages facilitated a record of romantic encounters that one can look back on with fondness. Ultimately, "no matter the obstacle, we keep finding love and romance" (251).

Wilby's book is modeled on *Modern Romance*—she cites from the work—and replicates Ansari's mix of academic investigation and personal story to explore her central question: is monogamy dead? Wilby draws on her own romantic experiences and those of her London-based lesbian community to explore a wide range of modern relationship styles and approaches. She covers demisexuality (110), relationship anarchy (213), conscious uncoupling (224), ghosting, icing and bread-crumbing (223), and interrogates concepts of masculinity (15) and the language for different types of love (329). One of the key challenges Wilby identifies for romance in the twenty-first century is "our lack of language"; "If we don't have words for a particular type of loving relationship, we can't talk about it and it remains invisible" (329). In service of this aim, Wilby provides a glossary for "help and support as to how to understand twenty-first-century relationships" (329). Wilby's book is more overtly feminist and inclusive than Ansari's *Modern Romance* and goes further into modern varieties of relationship.

Jacque Nodell's *How to Go Steady* (2017) is the latest in a recent stream of publications celebrating the twentieth-century romance comic.[3] Reflecting on advice columns in romance comics published by DC, Marvel, and Charlton, Nodell asks "Might we today take the lessons of the past and see the wisdom in them?" (Loc 1786). In her preface, Nodell argues that "as outdated as vintage romance comics may sometimes seem, believe it or not, they are full of practical dating advice" (Loc 70)—"as timeless as any Jane Austen novel" (Loc 70)—and draws similarities with "positive thinking self-help that is given today" (Loc 1360). Nodell's take on romance comics, despite their traditional tone, and "mid-century message that young women would ultimately find themselves drawn into 'feminine interests'" (Loc 431) is positive—she never criticises the advice or offers significant analysis of its messages (although she does allude to its heteronormativity and whiteness).

Nodell's aim is to both draw connections between past and present, but also to interrogate the particular historical context of the comics, including the postwar emphasis on youth marriage. She posits that "the advice columns of romance comics give a sense of the

issues that were on the minds of young people, and the societal norms that motivated the answers" (Loc 275). For example, "in an era when young marriage was the norm and ideal, it is unsurprising that readers viewed not being in a relationship as a serious problem needing a remedy from an advice columnist" (Loc 392). For Nodell, romance comics are "an incredibly rich source for discerning not only how dating was done in the 1960s and '70s but also, how it was *recommended* people date" (Loc 90). Ultimately, "this outpouring of courtship advice in the comic books was just another cog in the expertise machine that propelled the nation in the postwar years" (Loc 249). She concludes that "The advice columns will be remembered for their contribution to popular culture, and how they informed the psyche of the mid-century teen" (Loc 1776).

The advice is organised into nine chapters, covering the stages of a heterosexual, western courtship, from "Meeting the One," to "going steady," to marriage (a structure that echoes *Modern Love*). An introduction offers an overview of "who was dishing out this advice," naming a string of pseudonymic older women who dispensed advice in titles including *Girls' Romance*, *Girls' Love Stories*, *Heart Throbs*, *Secret Hearts*, *Young Love*, *Falling in Love*, and some male columnists, including "twins Marc and Paul" who wrote for DC (Loc 142) and Dr Harold Gluck for Charlton (Loc 168). Nodell notes that the authorship of romance comics and advice was overwhelmingly male and middle-aged (Loc 70). As for "Who was reading this advice?" (Loc 222), Nodell admits that the intended audience was undoubtedly "a white female teenager" (Loc 222) but that there is evident variation in age, race, and geography from letter-writers. Although, in the afterword Suzan Loeb, who wrote advice columns for Marvel in the 1970s, admits that she made up her letters to address universal problems which somewhat undercuts Nodell's argument about reader representation.

Methodology and approach

While rooted in the personal and in popular culture, *Modern Romance* and, to a lesser extent, *Is Monogamy Dead?* are clearly aiming for a research- and data-driven approach influenced by psychology, sociology and anthropology. *Modern Romance* is based on an ethnographic study (conducted with sociologist Eric Klinenberg) of groups and individuals around the world in 2013 and 2014. Ansari and Klinenberg conducted focus groups, monitored dating interactions through people's phones, and hosted an online forum on the website Reddit.com. They also drew on quantitative data from dating websites, interviews with academics, and additional survey data. Ansari cites liberally from the study's interview data, offering a rich picture of respondents and illustrating the variety of voices. The effect of this is that some chapters read not unlike *How to Go Steady*—chapter 2 of *Modern Romance*, for instance, offers guidelines on how to craft a successful text message to ask someone out as well as a list of basic rules such as "Don't text back right away [...] The amount of text you write should be of a similar length to what the other person has written to you" (57).

Is Monogamy Dead? draws on a mixture of scientific study, celebrity anecdote, and personal experience to explore its theme. We are presented with statistics from the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) on divorce and dissolution rates for marriage and civil

partnership (134-5), the results of surveys conducted on Dutch executives (59) and a survey by Helen Fisher for Match.com (104, 139). Wilby refers freely to documentaries, radio shows, books, newspaper and magazine articles, and even consults with experts, notably academic Qazi Rahman. Wilby conducted her own anonymous online survey, receiving 100 responses to probing questions about fidelity. Studies and articles are mentioned by name in almost every chapter lending the book substantial academic weight (although it would have been helpful if these citations had been gathered into a bibliography of some kind).

All three authors draw on their personal romantic lives to frame their works and explain the rationale for writing their books. Nodell begins by sharing the story of a failed relationship and how an ongoing interest in romance comics helped her through the heartbreak. Ansari opens by relating the story of a hook-up with a woman named Tanya and shares personal anecdotes throughout the book. Wilby's book in particular is disarmingly open about the author's personal romantic life and its inspiration for *Is Monogamy Dead?* This is an advantage of the book and, rather than detracting from the serious message, serves to contextualise it. Wilby's approach is less overtly comic, but it is more tender and thoughtful than Ansari's book; as Wilby herself says about a developing show: "I wanted to be authentic and mix up the comedy with some poignancy and pathos" (306). It is the tales of Wilby's own relationships that flesh out the book, richly illustrating precisely the points that the science seeks to prove. Wilby is careful to include other voices too—she devotes a chapter to the story of her neighbours, Jac and Angie, and gives a chapter—"Jen, in her own words"—to her ex-partner: a nice touch, as I found myself wondering about the 'other side' to Wilby's own stories.

Limitations

All three books have their limitations. The first is their national and cultural specificity. Nodell focuses exclusively on the USA and Wilby sticks to her native Britain. *Modern Romance* is the most international of these three books; Ansari conducted focus groups in Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Paris and Doha in addition to four cities in the USA. Ansari argues that these places demonstrate different cultural approaches to the USA in terms of dating (150). This allows Ansari to draw out some interesting comparisons. For example, in chapter 3, Ansari notes that while the rising use of technology in dating is seen by some in North America as challenging, in Qatar digital technology can lead to freedom, given the country's restrictive rules on socialising and dating. In chapter 5, "International Investigations of Love," Ansari considers the population crisis in Japan and the government's concern that young people are no longer interested in dating. He notes that 60% of Japanese male singles identify as herbivores: "Japanese men who are very shy and passive and show no interest in sex and romantic relationships" (157). Ansari ascribes this to changing gender roles in modern Japan, as women become more independent and prominent in the workplace. Ansari contrasts Japanese dating culture with Argentina, where street harassment of women is prevalent. As Ansari puts it, "Argentine men have a global reputation for their hot-blooded, romantic passion, which often bleeds over into something pathological and scary" (170).

A limitation of *Modern Love* and *How to Go Steady* is their heteronormativity. Ansari admits that his research focuses on middle-class heterosexuals and a similar audience can be imagined for the readers of advice in romance comics, as Nodell notes. Wilby is the only one of the three authors who explicitly addresses the heteronormativity of romantic discourse and seeks to do something different. She is quick to point to *Modern Romance*'s disclaimer that it focuses on heterosexual relationships. Wilby does not "mean to single him [Ansari] out specifically" (4), but she makes the valid point that "everything about love and sex in our world is viewed through a prism of assumed heterosexuality" (5). Indeed, Wilby's book is all the more valuable for being a rare study of women's same-sex relationships, although it also has much to say about heterosexual relationships and gay male partnerships.

Finally, while Wilby and Nodell's books are explicitly oriented to women's experience, *Modern Love* is less invested in gendered approaches to romance. Ansari does acknowledge some of the ways gender inequality shapes modern love. He admits that while modern love might be more complex, due to technology, women have far more choice than a few decades ago (238). When considering attitudes to infidelity in France, *Modern Love* notes (ventriloquized through a dog's voice) that "men are taking advantage of the women's goodwill and they are resigned to this demeaning situation" (208). But overall, the tone of *Modern Romance* remains light and inoffensive; Ansari would rather go for the joke than probe at the deeper message he is beginning to uncover. This was perhaps consistent with the societal tone of 2015, but in a post #MeToo world this levity feels, at times, inappropriate, especially when it signposts away from sexism and anti-women behaviour. Reading *Modern Love* in 2018, especially some of its content about sexual aggression, is not an entirely comfortable experience given subsequent discussion about its author. It's difficult to discount or ignore *Modern Romance* as it is such a touchstone for similar studies (as Wilby's book indicates), yet shifting cultural narratives around gender, sex, and consent mean that we are no longer consuming this work in the same way. Equally, there's an important point to be made (which Wilby makes in terms of visibility of non-heterosexual relationships) about who has the opportunity to write these kinds of books and whose perspectives on 'modern romance' get to be heard. Ansari's voice, as a heterosexual American man, is undoubtedly one of the most mainstream—perhaps it is time to make room for others who have historically not enjoyed such a platform (this is partly what #MeToo is about).[4]

There are, of course, limits as to what a popular audience book can do in terms of scholarly endeavour. All three authors do make an effort to provide scholarly resources and references: both Ansari and Wilby include bibliographies for further reading; Wilby includes a helpful glossary; *Modern Romance* provides full references for scientific citations and has an index. Nodell's book is not an academic text, but it does contain full references for comics cited and a small further reading section which will be of interest to the academic reader. Nodell's accompanying website, *Sequential Crush*, is also a useful resource for teaching and research purposes. However, the power of these books to disseminate certain ideas about romance, love, and modern culture make them relevant for those of us working at the academic end of the spectrum. In a sense, these are the kinds of works through which our research reaches a wider audience and, as such, are worthy of our consideration.

[1] The accusation and subsequent response from Ansari were published online: Katie Way, "I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life," *babe.net*, accessed 13 December 2018.

[2] I have argued likewise in my own research comparing late medieval advice for young people and contemporary British romance advice (Burge, 2018).

[3] See, for example, Michelle Nolan, *Love on the Racks: A history of American Romance Comics* (2008); Michael Barson, *Agonizing Love: The Golden Era of Love Comics* (2011); Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, *Young Romance: The Best of Simon & Kirby's Romance Comics* (2012).

[4] I recognise that Ansari is a person of colour, but he does not explicitly talk about race in *Modern Romance* meaning that identifiers of gender are foregrounded.

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